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Jewish temple marking 50 years

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When the Jewish synagogue in Springfield where the Orthodox congregation Temple B'nai Abraham worshipped fell in disrepair in the 1950s, members entered a time of transition.

B'nai Abraham, which served the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community on the city's near north side, established its presence at Seventh and Mason streets in 1895.

But the building that fell into disrepair and second-generation American Jews who had begun moving to the Washington Park/west side neighborhood caused B'nai Abraham to make a decision.

B'nai Abraham dissolved and re-chartered as Temple Israel, a Conservative synagogue around 1957.

"It was a transitional period and not an easy period," said Rabbi Barry Marks, who became the congregation's spiritual leader in 1973.

"They used various facilities around town — the old Springfield Theatre Guild on Lawrence between Spring and Second — I think they used the Dubois School, which is only about two blocks from our current facility. It was very, very transitional, but they managed to survive those three or four years."

The commitment evident in Temple Israel will be noted as the congregation observes the 50th anniversary of the opening of its present building at 1140 W. Governor St.

The synagogue building, land for which was donated by the congregation's five founders — Morris Kaiserman, Harry Potish, Harry Stern, Nathan Strum and Philip Wright — opened in time for the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement in fall 1961.

A celebration party noting the anniversary will be held Nov. 19, at the Hilton Springfield. The event will feature a 1950s theme. (See more details below.)

"It's just going to be a fun thing. It's a '50s party — I guess the whole process by which the congregation re-chartered and rebuilt happened in the late '50s and 50th anniversary and '50s kind of come together," Marks said.

Commitment and change

Structurally, Temple Israel's building is basically recognizable to people who were there in 1961. Improvements have been made — among them, lighting, the sound system, and installing a lift for the elevated area from which the service is conducted so that people using wheelchairs or walkers can take lead roles in the service.

But Marks said what counts "are the people and the spirit that's there."

The congregation peaked around 155 families. It now stands at around 120 families.

"We're very transient. A lot of people have moved here from out of town and affiliated with the congregation. We still have 20 to 25 households whose roots go back to the early days of the congregation," Marks said.

Barry Seidman's late father, Robert, was involved with the formation of Temple Israel. Both Barry's father and mother, Julie, participated in the operation of the temple, each serving as president (Robert from 1962 to 1963 and Julie from 1979 to 1981).

"My sister and I were raised with a family that was very involved, very active. It was a very important part of our lives. I just continued it," said Barry Seidman, who was president of Temple Israel from 1989 to 1991.

"It's very exciting to have a small congregation in a city like Springfield which has a fairly small Jewish community. It's a great achievement and very exciting that the congregation survives and continues to flourish after 50 years."

Weekly Sabbath services are held on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings at Temple Israel. Participation of women plus the greater role of the adult choir and instrumental music in the service are major changes.

Temple Israel is involved in educational and social activities and participates in joint endeavors with Temple B'rith Shalom, the Jewish Federation of Springfield and the Jewish Community Relations Council.

"In 25 years, the congregation has gotten somewhat smaller, but it continues to be a very strong and active and warm place to be," said Barbara Seidman, board president and wife of Barry Seidman. "Our numbers are smaller, but our sense of community and our outreach has not shrunk."







Tamara Browning can be reached at 788-1534.

Gala Celebration for the 50th anniversary of Temple Israel







- 6:30 p.m. to midnight Nov. 19
- Hilton Springfield, 700 E. Adams St.
- \$50, available by calling 546-2841

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